

The English Leaflet

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STUDENT ANTHOLOGIES

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Matthew Arnold has said, "The future of poetry is immense." Poetry more than any other sort of literature, in fact more than any one element in our complex curricula, enriches and ennobles personality. Like personality, appreciation of poetry is an intangible something that is resurrected in many different, and often extraordinary, ways. It is primarily the privilege of the English teacher to effect this resurrection; for every one at heart, whether he admits it or not, cares for and loves at least one poem. I recall a student who declared that she detested all poetry and that she dreaded the day when we should begin our poetry reading. Challenging this vehement statement, I learned that her antipathy had been engendered by the earnest efforts of a grammar-school teacher adequately to prepare her class for certain examinations that required the verbatim quoting of poetry, correct in spelling and punctuation. Happily the student's antipathy passed; and her experience was, without doubt, exceptional. To English teachers, appreciating the abundance of treasure in contemporary as well as in standard verse, and realizing their responsibility in developing catholicity of taste and appreciation in the present generation, the problem of poetry study in the school is of vital import. In reality the immensity of the problem is compassed by these considerations: how much of our limited time for English may we devote to the interpretation and appreciation of poetry, including contemporary verse; and how may we stimulate more intelligent voluntary poetry reading in our

students? The first consideration may be answered only in relation to individual conditions and objectives; the second holds various solutions, one of which is the student anthology.

As we consider it, the student anthology is a collection of poems made by the student, who has found something personally appealing in each poem that is included in his collection. This device or—if you will—strategy for extended supplementary reading, was the outgrowth of a pertinent problem. Although a wealth of poetry in several standard collections was available, a very limited time for poetry study in class was at my disposal. There was opportunity for ten times as much poetry reading as I could in conscience expect from more than a negligible minority of my students. How to stimulate thoughtful reading of what would be a herculean or impossible task if required, was perplexing. My students must not feel driven, they must enjoy the reading in order that they might be stimulated to make some tangible response, and I must have evidence that their reading had been intelligent and reflective. The student anthology was a means for the desirable achievement; all the different poetry collections could be used adequately by each student; each student would have a definite objective requiring discrimination and giving perfect freedom in a suitably limited field; the time element in the assignment was wholly subordinated; and for the teacher there was a tangible response registering individual reaction.

The collections of poetry were especially good in content. "Narrative and Lyric Poems for Students," S. S. Seward, Jr., gave the standard verse that has withstood the test of time. It was possible for each student to have a copy of this collection during the entire time that she was making her anthology. With others, I feel strongly that contemporary verse should be read in connection with standard verse. Not only does it bring out interesting comparisons, but also it establishes standards of culture that serve as touchstones of taste. It also helps to make the student realize that standard verse was once contemporary verse. The collections of modern verse: "Modern Verse," Anita P. Forbes, "The Little Book of Modern Verse," Jessie B.

Rittenhouse, and "Modern British Poetry," Louis Untermeyer, were fewer in number; but by foresight in planning and in exchanging, it was possible for every student to have each one of these collections for at least a week. Since a month was given for collecting the anthology, there was a feeling of leisure in the reading, notwithstanding the fact that a certain amount had to be done each week. Under this plan there was no procrastination.

The Greek Anthology and its influence on literature made an interesting approach. Then followed the specific assignment for outside reading. Within a month each student was to make a collection of fifteen poems that she really cared for to the extent of being able to justify her choice if asked to do so. These poems were to be selected from the four collections of verse already named, and at least two poems were to be selected from each book. The motives behind the requirement are obvious, but reiteration may be of value. Provision is made for the individual capacity of the student in various ways: a minimum requirement is set, but the student has an unlimited maximum; in scope and type the poetry selections, though adequate in values, offer wide variety so that every student can intelligently make a representative selection. Again, individual initiative is remembered in the touchstone of choice, which may be whimsicality, music, association, form, or theme; and also by the appearance and arrangement of the completed anthology.

From the viewpoint of the teacher there are four general aims: to find out obtaining preferences; to induce the copying of verse that it may have some tangible reaction even for the student who shrinks from creative verse; to increase interest in unassigned poetry reading; and to provide a personal nucleus of poetry that may be added to at leisure and that can trace the record of developing taste, appreciation, and culture.

The fifty-five anthologies were delightfully individual; some were perfectly plain, unadorned longhand copies on regulation theme paper; some had distinctive covers; others were carefully typewritten. In arrangement some were opportune; others were ordered according to theme, more

according to the collection from which they were culled, some according to the poet, and a few followed the alphabetical arrangement of titles. A number of the anthologies had happy little appurtenances, such as an index, a biographical account of each poet, personal reactions or estimates, and notations concerning the poems. The outstanding characteristics, however, were sincerity and intellectual independence in choice.

The last characteristic is conclusively proved by checking up the group distribution of poems. Of those selected from each collection, the greatest number was from Forbes, followed in order by Rittenhouse, Seward, and Untermeyer; but there was only a difference of ninety in the frequencies between the first and the last. This seems quite remarkable when one realizes that more than eight hundred poems were noted. The frequencies of individual poems is interesting. "In Flanders Fields" was most popular, having seventeen recurrences; "Irradiations" and "The Rosary," thirteen; "Sea Fever," "House and Road," twelve; "A Winter Ride," ten; and "By the Sea" and "The Old Woman," seven. There seems to be no conclusive significance to this particular grouping. So many influences go into the making of the individual anthologies that in this small group no scientific nor conclusive evidence may be established or even suggested concerning the study of poetry—that end is not the reason for the anthology. Its purpose is only to stimulate more intelligent voluntary poetry reading for the greater number of students.

The most significant and trustworthy evidence of the value of the poetry anthology for the individual student comes from student letters in which they recorded impressions about the poems that appealed most to them in their anthology and in which they gave any personal suggestions or comments that seemed timely. These letters were perfectly frank and candid because the students were not required to sign them unless they wished—but there were no unsigned letters. In a naive way the following representative quotations illustrate what, as English teachers, we wish to encourage: a touchstone for rereading and reading aloud worthwhile literature; association in seeing, thinking, and feeling with the poet;

an adequate interpretation and a reflective response; an appreciation of apt and beautiful expression of thought; and a deeper, more conscious interest in poetry.

Her Words, Anna Hempstead Branch

"I love to picture what one might call the obvious. This poem containing love, life, and happiness, combined with a mother's wisdom is a beautiful picture. The appeal to the imagination is what I want in a poem, and I feel that I have been satisfied."

On His Blindness, John Milton

"On examining the collection of poems edited by Seward, I was attracted by the title, *On His Blindness*. I read the poem through once; but not appreciating it as I felt it should be appreciated, I read it again. I liked it because it reminded me of a relative who was afflicted in the same way before half his life was spent."

Ellis Park, Helen Hoyt

"This poem especially attracted me, as there is near my home just such a little park as the poet speaks of."

Sea Fever, John Masefield

"To some the tide, running its regular course and breaking on the sandy beach, brings unhappy thoughts and fear. To me it brings pure peace and happiness.

"I have read this poem over many times, and yet each time some new thought comes to me."

Rheims Cathedral—1914, Grace Hazard Conkling

"It seems to have something of the superb style of the immortal Shelley.....I think the poet has succeeded in making us feel her emotions; this really is the greatest thing a poet can do."

To My Brother, Corinne Roosevelt Robinson

"The poem makes you realize the wonderful qualities of this man more than volumes of books could.....The words are not elegant, flowery words, such as poets and great writers are accustomed to use, but simple, sincere words conveying a world of meaning about a devotion that is lasting and true."

Renascence, Edna St. Vincent Millay

"There were parts of the poem that I did not completely understand, for the meaning is very deep and rather religious.....I could not decide whether the poem is supposed to express death and the life hereafter or the discovery of the great ever-present God by a soul in despair."

Cargoes, John Masefield

"John Masefield has a deeper thought than the surface brilliance, for he wished to describe, by means of the symbol, cargo, his visions of commerce. He shows us how long ago the only cargoes carried were beautiful useless things, but now the ships on the great oceans bear essential everyday objects, which are of use to all people in the world."

Ode, Arthur O'Shaughnessy

"The people whom we call dreamers are really the people who are building this world.....If a man has not a vision before him, he can never accomplish what he could if he had some ideal to reach forward to. In every age we see some man's dream taking form for the good of all the people."

The Dawn Patrol, Paul Bewsher

"On mornings when I have walked along a lonely sea shore, I have often thought how much I should like to be among the clouds. The feeling that I was alone in the presence of God seemed to be with me, though indefinable. The poem puts into just the right words this feeling, so easily understood but so hard to express.

"Poetry has never appealed to me very strongly, perhaps because I was never shown or told how to appreciate it..... Lately I have been reading, silently or aloud, a good bit of poetry."

Reactions such as these attest an interest in the poetry of the past and of the present and augur well for future reading and appreciation. Outside poetry reading approached through the student anthology for many will make possible the ideal sentiment quoted by Marguerite Wilkinson in "New Voices:"

"Life has its limitations, I must be what I am, one person with one person's experience. But through poetry I can have a share in the lives and adventures of others. I can travel on roads that my feet have never touched, visit in houses that I have never entered, share hopes and dreams and conquests that have never been mine. Poetry can be for me the fishing trip that I was never able to take, the great city that I have not seen, the personalities that I have not fathomed, the banquets to which I have not been invited, the prizes that I did not win, the achievement that was beyond my reach. It can be even the love that I have not known. Through poetry I shall share the life of my own times, of all times; I shall know the soul of all men and my own soul."

THE VITAL TOUCH IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

By MARY PERCIVAL

Hunter College High School

The teacher of English gets her inspiration more often outside than inside her profession. After all, literature is not an ornament or a by-product of life but the inevitable expression of any human life that has passed beyond the purely savage state. Language is the medium of that expression. The best teachers are, as they have always been, more than teachers. They see the problems of teaching in relation to the rest of life. They have interests outside the specific tasks which they set themselves in the classroom.

But no teacher of English needs to be reminded of how insistent and absorbing those tasks are—how very difficult it is not to settle down, consciously or unconsciously, to the routine of her profession, accepting without question the traditional methods of approach to her subject. Only by her contact with life can she see her work in proper perspective—and in a world as rapidly changing as the world of today, how vitally necessary it is to keep in touch with those whose lives give them a view of far horizons and an insight into the forces that are revolutionizing the society to which we are accustomed.

The teacher of English in the New York school is fortunate beyond all others in the respect that contact with the best that is being “known and thought” in the life of today, is so easy to make. Ideas that illuminate and give force and fresh impulse to her work are to be had almost for the asking—and often, straight from the lips of poet, artist, critic, or scholar. All the throbbing life of the city can be made to serve her purpose. She is limited only by her power to absorb, and the obvious necessity of concentrating on specific objectives to achieve any results.

It is with the idea of illustrating the opportunities for such inspiration in the city that I wish to speak of certain ideas that have recently given stimulus and direction to my thought.

Carl Van Doren, addressing the Association of Teachers of English, pointed out the fact that the standard English classics deal largely with a life so alien to the experience of New York high-school boys and girls that they are bound to think of literature as something remote from reality. Unless they come from cultured homes or are bookish by temperament, literature makes no appeal to them, immersed as they are in the business of living. Mr. Van Doren would correct this misconception by encouraging the reading of contemporary fiction in which is embodied the observation of authors primarily interested in portraying the life of America today.

He believes it is a grievous mistake to try to protect high-school boys and girls from all the realistic novels that deal with the less happy aspects of life. It is doing them a great injustice, he says, to thrust them at the end of their school days, wholly unprepared, into a world where the righteous are not always rewarded, where the hero and the heroine do not always live happily ever after, and where moral values are not standardized. Not that he would fail to discriminate in the selection of such fiction. He would choose, of course, such books as are best adapted for acquainting the adolescent with reality, and the limitation of time imposed upon the teacher necessitates a very careful choice.

However, once the pupil becomes interested in books through the reading of fiction, which because of its story interest appeals more than non-fiction, and through a realization of the oneness of literature and life, the whole world of books is open to him. Not only are there then available biography, essays, books of travel, which deal directly with reality as he knows it, but also the older books, which he can now see deal with the underlying and universal truths of life.

Only a few days before I heard Mr. Van Doren, I listened, with quickened pulse, to Carl Sandburg reading his Rootabaga stories at the Public Library on the opening day of the Children's Book week. He brought to me a fresh consciousness of the America that lies beyond the limited circle of literary traditions and academic interests wherein teachers

of English usually move. He gave me a vision of that vast, many-sided America that schools and universities so often ignore, the America of the cotton plantations and lumber camps, of wheat fields and coal mines, of mills and factories; a crude yet powerful America that is expressing itself in a language and literature not yet recognized or accepted.

He dwelt on the idea that poetry and imagination can find nourishment not only in the environment conventionally associated with them but in the most commonplace and even ugly surroundings. Woe be to America, he said, unless the imagination of our boys and girls can find something to feed on in an atmosphere of gas stoves and steam radiators as well as in that of "fireside and hearth".

He gave me also a new sense of the beauty of rhythm, the natural unstudied rhythm of folk song and common speech in which simple and pure emotion finds expression. The rhythms are no less lovely because the words, symbols, and images are homely and unhallowed by literary association.

As he sang in his beautifully modulated voice, to the low accompaniment of guitar, the strange haunting song of the Bolweevil, (this particular version, he said coming from Oklahoma by way of Texas,) I wondered if it were not possible, without in any way undervaluing the classic, for the teacher of English to search out and present for the appreciation of her pupils more of our American folk songs and of the literature that embodies our folk life. I thought of Vachel Lindsay's "In Praise of Johnny Appleseed" and Robert Frost's "Paul's Wife", as typical of an American literature that is rarely used in the English classroom. Such folk literature may not conform to classical standards but may be vital and very beautiful nevertheless, if only we are willing to recognize the new forms of beauty.

Twice then within a single week had I been forced to question the adequacy of the high-school course of study in literature. Twice had I been shaken out of my accustomed mental processes.

Another such illuminating idea came to me in Dorothy Canfield Fisher's introduction to "The Girls' Book of Verse," compiled and recently published by Mary Gould Davis. "Don't open the doors for the children. Give them the keys."

So well aware, she says, are parents and teachers of the spacious kingdoms of the mind, so eager are they that their children shall enter in, that they have an almost irresistible impulse to push open the doors and thrust their charges, willy, nilly, across the thresholds.

Reading this I recalled asking a young girl who her favorite author was. "George Borrow" she answered; and then with a sudden light in her eye, "I discovered him myself. Nobody ever told me to read him."

Every teacher of English, I suppose, has resented, as I do, the criticism so often made that the study of a book in the English classroom spoils the book. Yet frequently such criticism is justified. The book to be read, the ideas to be discussed, the qualities to be appreciated, are too often virtually prescribed by the teacher and all the joy of discovery, experiment, and choice is denied the pupil.

Let the boy once understand that through literature he can extend almost indefinitely the bounds of that fascinating colorful thing, which he doesn't call life, but which is life, and which calls him so alluringly away from school, he becomes an eager adventurer, trying all sorts of doors with his keys.

A wholly different phase of the work of the English teacher is vivified in a letter of Walter Lippman, written last spring, to the Association of Teachers of English.

"To teach English," he says, "in a community like ours is to be dealing every day with the main instrument of civilized living. To give that instrument edge, point and temper is a sacred task." Habits of speech, he explains are habits of thought. The vocabulary of the average man is meagre, colorless, commercial. "He knows objects only by the general species to which they belong." Words bring no concrete images to his mind. Yet it is these concrete images that are the base of imagination.

"What hope is there for the solution of the underlying problems of our civilization, the problem of enabling a man to master an unseen environment without a great development of our machinery of accounting, analysis, record and

reporting. The teacher of English is the critical factor in the whole affair."

What dignity such a conception gives to the work of the teacher of English! With what a new sense of its importance will she set about tasks that have sometimes seemed humdrum and trivial. To extend the vocabulary of her children, familiarizing them with the concrete object of daily living as well as with general terms; to develop in them a discriminating sense of the meaning and value of words and the habit of using words with precision—this is to contribute to the formation of a sound public opinion upon which the success of the republic will ultimately depend.

Such moments of insight as these which I have attempted to suggest, and which the opportunities New York offers for contact with the creative minds of America make so easily possible, enable the teacher of English to go to her task with high heart and new zeal. They glorify her job.

—*School and Home.*

EDITORIAL NOTES

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL STUDY

This year, both at Harvard and at Boston University, additional courses for the professional study of English teaching are being offered at the two schools of education. The increased demand for this type of special work here in New England is typical of the tendency throughout the United States. It augurs well for higher achievement, not only in the English classroom but throughout the school systems; for no school ever rises higher than its English.

THE RECITATION CONCEPT

The opening of each school year brings to each teacher a renewed sense of obligation. All of us in our separate fields are experiencing a pedagogical renaissance. Our summer ex-

perience, whether in a systematic academic curricula or in capricious wanderings through forest and field, has brought new ideas that we are now beginnnig to try out in our English classrooms. A brief analysis of one of these has come to the editor's notice.

"I wonder," a teacher is saying, "if I have not been wrong in my emphasis. I have always, heretofore, thought of the recitation hour as a testing hour. My function was that of an inspection officer. I was inclined to congratulate myself if I discovered careless culprits; it marked my power as a detective. I'm going to change that attitude—particularly in my advanced classes. While I am, of course, going to hold them responsible for the assigned work, I am going to develop the conference idea; I shall emphasize the notion that I am not so much concerned with the exact facts in the assignment as I am with the individual reaction of facts and ideas upon the pupil. The pupil, moreover, as a member of this conference group, should be made to feel that always he should be prepared to make his contribution. His achievement on the record book will be measured in terms that register the value of his individual contributions."

"Sound pedagogy," notes the editor, as he reads the comment and wonders how many will follow it.

THE SUMMER MEETING AT HARVARD

The summer records one more achievement of our Association. Under the direction of President Gay and his associates a program of distinct merit was formulated and executed. The general theme was Modern Literature in the English Course.

There were three speakers: Professor W. M. Tanner spoke on the teaching of the modern personal essay, drawing illustrations from his own book, "Essays and Essay-Writing."

Miss Anita Forbes, well known for her book, "Modern Verse," spoke with delightful informality of methods which she had used in teaching contemporary poetry, particularly emphasizing parallel treatments—how the same idea finds various expression under the pen of various poets. Mr. A. C. Poley contributed a most inspiring paper on the teaching of modern drama.

The experiment was of such unquestioned success as to warrant repetition through succeeding summers. The large number of teachers studying English at Harvard and at Boston University, aside from sharing in these particular meetings, will learn of the varied activities of our Association, and thus the area of our influence will expand.

FOR THE COURSE IN POETRY

MODERN VERSE—Edited by Anita P. Forbes

Poems of contemporary authors of England and America, selected for their interest as well as for their literary value.

BRITISH VERSE—Edited by Daniel V. Thompson

Selections from the works of the best known of the English poets, from Chaucer to Masefield, admirably adapted to interest boys as well as girls.

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